

# Steve Wiegand: Get a clue: Get jobs for ex-cons

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Let's say you just got out of prison.

They've given you \$200, less the price of your bus ticket. The odds are 3 to 1 you were, or still are, a druggie or a drunk.

You don't have an education, your work habits are dubious, and seeing as how you were probably in the joint for hurting someone or taking something that didn't belong to you, your people skills aren't the best.

Why haven't you found a job yet?

OK, that's obviously a rhetorical question, the answer to which is obvious even to a lamebrain columnist. But it does help frame one of the big chicken-and-egg problems faced by the state in dealing with its prison mess: keeping the people who get out from quickly going back in, something they currently do in California at the depressingly high rate of about 70 percent.

At the risk of overgeneralizing, I'd say the folks in prison can be lumped into three categories. The first is the sociopaths who are ideally suited to stay just where they are. The second is composed of losers who are too lazy or stupid or self-pitying to take advantage of a second chance even if it kicks them in the butt.

The third, however, is populated by guys like David Harris, who found himself at the age of 30 on a bus to the state prison at Susanville as a result of his second felony conviction for burglary.

Harris decided during the ride that he didn't want to be a loser. So when he got to Susanville, he jumped at a chance to learn a skill under the vocational rehab program run by the Prison Industry Authority.

Fast-forward 20 years. Harris is now a 50-year-old optometric technician in Southern California. He has a family and a mortgage, coaches boys' basketball, and through his taxes helps support the prison system of which he was once a part.

This story would be much more warm and fuzzy if the PIA's programs had the capacity to serve more than the 6,000 inmates they do, which is roughly 3.5 percent of all of those who are locked up.

The prison reform plan that legislators and Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger have come up with contains elements designed to provide more opportunity for inmates to get clean and learn a marketable skill. But that doesn't get them a job. To that end, the PIA and PRIDE Industries -- the country's largest job finder for people with disabilities -- have teamed up to encourage employers to give ex-cons a chance.

The two groups sponsored what amounted to a pep rally Tuesday in the handsome 14th-floor California Chamber of Commerce's conference room in the Esquire Building.

Speakers, who ranged from the aforementioned David Harris to Sacto County Sheriff John McGinness, urged businesses to give a fair shake to applicants who checked "yes" to that "Have you ever been convicted of a felony?" question.

They pointed out tax credits available in some cases to employers who hire former felons and federal government-provided fidelity bonds to indemnify employers against being ripped off by ex-cons for the first six months of their employment.

But even with training, rehab and support from groups like PRIDE, there is still that huge stigma of being an ex-con to overcome.

Look at all the media fuss about the fact that the guy who crashed his gasoline tanker into the Bay Area overpass Sunday morning was an ex-con, even though there's not a shred of evidence his criminal record had a thing to do with having an accident.

"You're going to have to take a chance on hiring someone," Harris told the group Tuesday. "It could be on someone who will be very grateful for the chance."

Or we could just bet on a prison system with revolving doors.  
That's a sure thing.